

## The Roots of Sexual Violence

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**T**here is an enormous question that lurks behind any discussion of men and masculinities. There is a deep presumption that men are – naturally – aggressive sexual predators disposed to raging violence, while women are passive victims good only for reproduction. If this binary construction is ‘natural’ if it is our DNA as a species, then what is the point of asking ‘Why are men and women unequal? Why are lesbians and gays oppressed? Why are many men violent? Why is sexual violence so common?’

Yet these are very old, very important questions. For thousands of years, the most forceful answers have come from the people who dominate society. Such arguments can be found in the ancient Mesopotamian Epic of Gilgamesh, in the Old and New Testaments of the Bible, the Mahabharata and the teachings of Confucius. The loud answers of such class elites invariably claim that war, oppression and sexual violence were part of the natural order of things.

In our own time popular books by Steven Pinker, Jared Diamond and Yuval Noah Harari do a similar job. These books deceive us by claiming enlightenment credentials as secular, liberal and modern. Their work is clever and confusing. So are the ideas of evolutionary psychology they promote. They deplore violence but say it is now better controlled and managed than in earlier times. But, they say, unfortunately, male aggression is an inevitable part of human nature. This is the law of

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evolution, they say because men fight each other to possess women sexually. They say that men are competitive, sexist and greedy.

Joan Roughgarden, the distinguished biologist, and trans person has called these accounts fantasy posing as science. She says they are thinly concealed rape narratives. And new research now shows that Pinker and Co. are not just mistaken, but worse. They are contemporary ideologues myth-making to justify the patriarchal systems we see today.

However, elite narratives have never been the only ones on offer. In class societies, there is always a political struggle between the powerful and the oppressed. And the weak and vulnerable protect themselves as best they can. Their voices and actions can be seen and heard in moments of resistance, from the smallest acts of defiance to transgressive collective rituals, protests, rebellion and revolution.

What I have to say today is part of that resistance. I consider the roots of sexual violence to lie in the relation between class and gender, and I'm aiming in this talk today to ignite a revolution.

### **A Unified Theory of Class and Gender**

**M**y argument comes from work I've been doing with Jonathan Neale. We have a book coming out with Cambridge University Press, called *The Roots of Sexual Violence*. We would have liked to have both been here, but that wasn't possible, so I've become the spokeswoman for Jonathan and myself.

In the book, we put together a unified theory of class and gender. It is ambitious, but there is now so much new material to draw on that ambition is appropriate.

Thanks to chemical microanalyses, DNA sampling, radiocarbon dating, and patient archaeology in humble homes, we have learned a great deal about the people who lived in pre-class and then early class societies. There are now many amazing new studies of non-human primates and primate behavior, new archaeology of early humans and new ethnographies of near-contemporary hunter-gatherers. Among our heroes are the extensive publications of the readable Christopher

Boehm, Frans de Waal, R. Brian Ferguson, Sarah Hrdy, Martin Jones and Laura Rival.

This work is transforming the study of human evolution and human history. This means it is also a very good time to reconsider what we know about men, masculinities, and the roots of sexual violence.

Our starting point may come as a surprise. It now seems that we became human by becoming equal. This is a remarkable and precious insight.

Early humans were puny primates. To survive, they had to learn to share meat and vegetables, to share childcare and to share sexual joy. To do this, they had to discipline would-be bullies and transcend the dominance hierarchies of their primate ancestors. And for more than 200,000 years, they lived in egalitarian societies where men and women were equal too.

Then, beginning about 12,000 years ago, the invention of agriculture made class societies possible. Elites gained control of much more than their share of the food that other people grew. Wherever there were such elites, men and women became unequal too. And with class inequality came patriarchy, cults of male violence, and sexual violence.

But the consistent association between economic inequality, sexism, and sexual violence is extraordinary. The central questions any theory of gender must answer are – Why? And what is the relation between class society and male dominance?

To answer these questions, the place to start is with permanent tension. On the one hand, were the habits of gendered equality and cooperation favoured during our long history as hunter-gatherers. On the other hand, were the relations of male dominance and submission which are also part of our primate heritage and adaptation. And because the association between male dominance and class societies is found everywhere, and is so strong, it makes sense to look to class for the reasons the balance tipped, and gendered inequality became the norm in

class societies. So even as we dismiss the ideologues Pinker and his ilk, we still need to ask – why men?

We don't think the answers are hard to come by. They derive from both our primate heritage and the character of class society.

### Why Men?

Looking comparatively at gibbons, baboons, gorillas, chimpanzees, and bonobos, four things are most telling about our primate legacy. First, size. As a species, human beings display a modest degree of sexual dimorphism. That means that most men, on average, are somewhat larger and stronger than their mothers and sisters and wives.

Second, male ambush hunters of big game are also part of our long human history. And we can be sure that in any community the few gifted, able hunters understood weapons and killing. Nor did hunting cease with the advent of class society. Farmers continued to hunt in many parts of the world and still do.

Third, there are primate hierarchies. Our primate cousins show two patterns. One is gendered equality in peaceful pairs, like gibbons, or occasionally squabbling groups, like bonobos. The other pattern is male domination of subordinated males and females. These are the societies of silverback gorillas and rampaging chimps. As Frans de Waal has noted, what is striking is not the aggression of alpha males, but the submission all males and females display during most or all of their lives. Humans, he says, are submissive animals by nature. In fact, our human primate adaptation falls somewhere in between living in peace with each other and being dominated by aggressive males. We can go either way.

Fourth, humans are highly sexed primates, and we are social animals who need love and care to survive. The way human anatomy and sexual habits differ from other primates is fascinating. We argue that this range of changes – this adaptation, as biologists say - became established because they fitted humanity to a new kind of sexual politics. The range includes the difference in size between males and females; it is only about 15%. This is about the same as chimpanzees and bonobos, and

points to the possibility of either sexual equality, as we see with bonobos, or some sexual inequality, as with chimpanzees.

Then there are questions about male genitals – the variation in penis and testicle size among primates. As a general rule, a male primate has a small penis compared to body size if the female is unlikely to mate with another male. Human penises are long - longer than those of chimpanzees and baboons, but bonobo penises even longer. The human penis is bigger around, smoother in the vagina, and simultaneously harder and softer. As Loretta Cormier and Sharyn Jones argue convincingly in their splendidly titled book, *The Domesticated Penis*, this is a penis produced by female choice over a long period of evolution.

There were also changes in the human vagina. Humans developed labia. The labia majora and the labia minora work to cover and protect the vagina and help keep it moist. The vagina also grew longer. The clitoris acquired a hood that protected the sensitive tip. And the clitoris moved forward, away from the vagina. On balance, the evolutionary change seems to have guarded the clitoris against damage during childbirth and worked to protect a woman's subsequent sexual enjoyment.

Then there are all the secondary sexual characteristics, among them human female breasts, which are large in comparison with other apes. Chimps, gorillas, and all other primates nurse perfectly well without them. Except, as it happens, female bonobos, who have smaller breasts than human females, but bigger than those of other apes. So it looks like large breasts, too, are indicators of sexual choice, but this time by ancient bonobos and men.

Humans are also vaginally active in all their adult lives. They do not just have sex around the time of ovulation. This is an enormous difference between humans and other primates. Above all else, it suggests the importance of sexual satisfaction all year round, which brings us to the similarities in human orgasms.

First, there are the anatomical similarities between the clitoris and the penis. Both the penis and the clitoris have a tip concealed by a flap. Directly above the clitoris, inside a woman, there is a large amount

of soft tissue. That internal clitoris and the external penis are about the same size when they're erect. With sexual stimulation, all this tissue becomes engorged with blood, and tension builds until orgasm provides a sudden release.

Moreover, all human orgasms similarly involve the whole body. Both men and women ejaculate. Both men and women have wet dreams.

Precisely because human sex is not mainly about reproduction, it can energise many kinds of sex. It can bring many kinds of people together in heterosexual, but also men with men, women with women. In each case, this equal orgasmic potential makes all individuals more equal. And that means, of course, it makes women and men more equal as well. Their desires are equal, their equipment is equal, and their practice can be equal.

We don't know which came first, hunting big game and the need to share meat, the dietary needs that led to shared childcare, or the extension of empathic love or human sexual passion. But there is an obvious synergy. As human relationships became saturated with sexuality, human sexuality could also become saturated with love.

So, we are primates who take pleasure in masturbation. We delight in mutually pleasuring our sexual partners and sharing sexual joy. Choosing to make babies can also be part of the fun. Raising children well, laughing at their antics, watching grandchildren grow, are precious to us. And even when thoughts of making love may be far from our minds, our daily lives are filled with sexual imagery and with respect, affection, and love.

This gift of sexuality and sexual love are central to who we are. But for that very reason, they are also the places where we are most vulnerable. Love can easily be traduced, sullied, or stolen by those who would harm us.

For over 200,000 years, hunter-gatherers survived and thrived because they cooperated. That cooperation required women and men to be equal. Women and men shared food and childcare, like bonobos. And

like bonobos, they enjoyed sex and worked together to stop dominant men from taking over. In the stories of hunter-gatherers cutting bullies down to size, the bullies are always arrogant men.

This certainly doesn't mean that all hunter-gatherers were culturally identical. Clearly, they have been extraordinarily diverse, speaking different languages, living in very different environments, having an enormous range of cultural styles and habits. But it does mean there has never been a fixed association, a single configuration, between communities of hunter-gatherers and inequality between men and women.

But then, with the development of class societies, things changed.

### ***Class Society and Male Violence***

**W**hen humans invented agriculture, it became possible for predatory elites to control food surpluses. They used force and introduced sexist ideologies to sustain class inequality. But it took thousands of years to consolidate class rule. As James Scott has told us, many people rebelled, and others fled to the forests or the mountains. In *The Creation of Inequality*, Kent Flannery and Joyce Marcus show us how farmers sometimes re-established equalitarian communities for a time, and then maybe 100 or 200 years later, in the same place, an elite group came in and took over again. The new archaeology of this long history is compelling. It allows us to argue that neither male violence nor war is inevitable. They are not given aspects of human nature.

And this new work invites us to offer a cogent explanation for the male violence and war associated with class societies and the exercise of class power.

Ambush hunting, the slight differences in average body size between men and women, and an old primate tendency to bullying and hierarchy meant some men were disposed to use thuggery to dominate others. But in pre-class societies, hierarchy and gender inequality were kept in check. Then came the new class order.

In every unequal society, we see the rich and powerful use fear and violence to gain control of people and food. Before the invention of gunpowder, violence required size, strength and an inclination to bully and humiliate others. In class societies, those who sought power also sought out big, strong aggressive men to be their henchmen to enforce elite power. Belligerent men became enforcers and subordinated other men and women. And at that point, many people faced the daily threat of violence, and most men and women were forced to submit to violent men for most of their lives.

In this process, violence and power were gendered male. Torture, rape, and murder are the ultimate violations. They are also among the most powerful form of class discipline elites have used to control others. Torture, rape and murder are uniquely powerful ways to make us fear for ourselves and the people love. It is not an accident that these forms of violence – torture, rape and murder – have been used, in many times and places, as a metaphor for what ruling classes do to the exploited and for what humanity does to all living things.

In this way rape particularly became the iconic expression of male domination, patriarchy, and gendered oppression. Women and men who are raped often carry helplessness and fear with them for the rest of their lives. Children born after a rape may embody the assault. The man or woman who is forced to witness their child, parent, or lover raped suffers terrible pain for being unable to protect the people they love. There seems to be no limit to the obscene, horrific ways such violence may be carried out. The extremes are the ends of a continuum. And less traumatic forms of sexual abuse and insult carry this threat, as many contemporary accounts, such as those by Sohaila Abdulalai, Roxanne Gay and Redi Tlhabi attest.

Class power allows an elite to control supplies of food, to the command of luxury goods and ensure their own comfort and safety. Elite power is also often evident in their license to have sex whenever and with whomever they want. This means, we argue, that in class societies sexual violence is encouraged and enabled from the top down and



resisted from below. And this means that resistance too is always gendered, in an almost infinite variety of ways.

Warfare was an extension of the same dynamic. For most of the history of class society, warfare was a matter of hand to hand combat. Guns and drones have been great gender equalizers, but they are recent. Earlier, size and strength mattered. Before gunpowder and modern arms, it was important that men were on average a bit larger than women. This is, of course, a continuum. Many women are stronger than many men. But with violence a prerequisite, it makes sense to put the men in the warrior slot and use gendered difference, and our need for love and care, to further divide and rule.

Indeed, size and strength probably mattered most in everyday village confrontations. Then the landlord's thug would need to move fast to hit an angry farmer and thereby cow the spectators who gathered round. An overseer was often only one step above serfs or slaves, but three steps below his master. His relative privilege was precarious, and it was in his interest to be particularly brutal to keep the hierarchy in place.

### *Five Key Ideas*

**T**he new research allows us to think afresh about human origins: beginning with the 200,000 history of egalitarian cooperation, and then the recent 12,000-year history of class inequality with its consistent associations with patriarchy, and gendered violence. Being able to think causally about cultural variation and cultural change opens a whole new way of approaching the study of gendered relations and men and masculinities.

In the book, Jonathan and I have worked through a set of quite diverse gender histories in pre-class societies and between class and gender in ancient Greece, in pre-Colombian North America, to religious wars in medieval France, sodomy in the British Navy, through gendered relations in the dictatorships of the USSR and China and our present

political economy of neoliberalism. And in this process, Jonathan and I have found five key ideas extremely useful.

The first of these concerns love. Love and a disposition to equality were fundamental to human evolution. We are social animals and have always needed love to survive as human beings. But in class societies, our need for love makes us vulnerable. Our need for love is at the root of the utterly extraordinary association between class inequality and gender inequality. I'll come back to how this works in a minute.

The second idea suggests how our ancient disposition to sharing and love becomes a perennial source of resistance to class inequalities – between the haves and have-nots, the 1% and the 99%, the rulers and the ruled. And because we are disposed to resist inequality, powerful people use ideas – ideologies – to justify unfairness. Wherever we look, gender differences support forms of class inequality. Notice the logic of this argument – that class divisions come first and gendered differences are used to support and naturalize class.

People have been deemed unequal for many different reasons. They are of the wrong caste or have the wrong skin colour or the wrong faces. Perhaps they eat the wrong food or they wash the dead in the wrong way. Such forms of discrimination create an 'us' and 'them.' Over time old forms of discrimination are reconfigured into new racisms for new times – into new versions of white power, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia and all the rest.

These divisions help the elite divide and rule. This is hateful, but it is not confusing.

But compared with race, sect or tribal differences, sexism confuses us much more because it goes a long way beyond 'us' and 'them'. Sexism creates inequality inside the 'we' of race, sect, and tribe. Sexism sunders solidarity. Sexism divides men from women of the same group. Sexism divides husbands from wives, fathers from mothers, mothers from sons, and sisters from brothers.

Gender marking also divides men from other men – dominant men from subordinates. Gender marking also divides women from other women: the lady from her maid, as Clara Zetkin put it. And so too, gender

marking divides fathers from sons, sisters from each other, alpha males and their beautiful women from the rest.

These love knots are the deepest and most effective way elites have found to make inequality seem inevitable. And when inequality is naturalized through our intimate experience of love, it becomes nearly impossible to say inequality is NOT natural, but instead benefits a few people and but harms many others.

Let me say a bit more here because this is such an important idea.

As Andrea Cornwall and I set out in *Dislocating Masculinity* more than twenty years ago, our understanding of gender draws on our understanding of race. We know that differences in skin colour are real, and biological. But we also know that these differences are trivial compared with what all people have in common as human beings. The same is true with the differences between men and women, but sexism today is so insidious that speaking of the similarities between women and men is unfamiliar.

Of course, our bodies differ, including our reproductive organs, genitals and a range of secondary sexual characteristics. But so what? Like skin colour, the differences lie on a continuum. Maleness and femaleness, our fertility, our experience of desire and sexual habits do not differ in kind, only in degree. And meanwhile, we are the same in the ways our hearts and lungs and metabolism work, in the ways we perceive the world, and in our speech, our emotions and our needs as social animals.

Each of us absolutely knows this from our own experience. But sameness is an argument that challenges the hierarchies of class. And sameness also challenges the versions of identity politics that presently dominate our world. So, the argument for sameness frightens us. It can feel safer to dismiss sameness as implausible, outrageous or simply mad. Yet such an argument is exactly what we need to get us to a place where we can make sense of sexism.

When class, race, or gender differences are marked and naturalized, they can seem as if they are 'god-given' and 'meant to be.'

The trick is to escape the prevailing assumptions that women and men are fundamentally different, with pink and blue brains.

But getting there is difficult because we are born, educated, and live in class societies. In these societies, we experience love in ways that make every kind of inequality seem natural. We learn at our mother's knee that love, however kind and caring, is also a trap. That a mother's love often depends on using guilt and 'discipline' to make sure we conform to class expectations.

Guilt and control and class expectations also play a big part in our lives as we struggle to make ends meet or raise our children. Just think how domestic battles are infused with everyday sexism – about household chores, sex, drink, money and vacation dreams. In this way, inequality becomes part of our intimate loving selves – in bed, over breakfast, at work, partying, and picking up the children from school. And it becomes easy to blame each other and lose sight of the inequalities of class that shape our lives. So love locks us in and can leave us lost and alone. Love can hurt and anger us. And sexism sometimes kills.

A third key idea of explaining changing class and gender histories is simple but often left out of the equation. It is that important economic changes inevitably challenge elite privilege. This means that the project of the ruling class in any era is to manage the economy to keep themselves in power. New technologies appear – the wheel, gunpowder, steam power, the internet. New people grab control of raw materials – gold and silver, cotton and sugar, coal and oil and gas. Or new people take over established businesses or banks.

When change threatens the ruling class power, they respond as fast and effectively as they can. This is not to say ruling classes are homogeneous, or that their interests are identical. Clearly, they are not. But they do share a commitment to inequality. To make the new forms of inequality seem natural, they work hard to reshape our ways of thinking about gender and our intimate experience of love. To do this, they change the rules about who we can marry; they reopen debates

about abortion, they attack gays and lesbians, or revoke transgender rights, or hide sexual abuse or find new ways of describing the perfect family and how we should live and what we should think, and what we should wear.

The fourth key point is that this struggle creates a deep and abiding tension between those at the top and the rest of us. Whatever new ideas the rulers come up with, they are never enough. So always and everywhere, the people at the top use of violence to keep inequality in place. Violence often performed and always lurking, is a necessary part of any system of economic inequality. And because love is central to our being, all violence too is gendered and sexualized. Consider only the most striking ideological props – the warrior epics, the Rambos, the Terminators, and the elaborate cults which sexualize male violence. Violence is a central part of any system of gendered inequality. Domestic violence and rape are not unfortunate anomalies. They are basic to how class systems work.

Class societies have now conquered every corner of the world. Everywhere, elites encourage sexist ideas that effectively habituate us to the sexual violence and rape which anchor complex systems of sexual inequality.

And still, we resist. Still, we experience compassion in the best of lovemaking, in our delight in the laughter of a small child, when we care for someone and someone cares for us when we get lost in music and dance, worship, ritual or collective political action. This has always been the paradox of the love knot. Love is both a prison and a prison break.

The fifth key idea is that in such moments we share feelings and dreams far bigger than ourselves. We can forget, momentarily at least, the colour of our skin, and whether we are woman or man. And when we do manage to put our commonality before our differences, our resistance explodes in power and joy.

Hang on to the insights from the new research that we evolved from our primate ancestors into egalitarian, non-sexist hunter-gatherers,

who shared food, childcare and sexual joy and dealt with bullies – and that 200,000-year heritage is still with us.

Seeing human evolution in this way also gives us a new way of thinking about men and masculinities and the naturalizing myths of mainstream thinking which dominate our lives. Understanding the class basis of male dominance and male violence is a powerful tool for fighting sexism, harassment, and abuse. Sexual violence is not inevitable. And it can be challenged unconditionally at every turn.

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